

# A Response to Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi's Paper on Paññāvimutta\*

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In 2007 Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi published a paper in the Journal of the Pali Text Society titled “The *Susīma-sutta* and the Wisdom-Liberated Arahant”, in which he argued that the idea of an *arahant* devoid of *jhāna* may be traceable in the Pali Canon itself. I subsequently wrote a response to that article. Unfortunately, the Pali Text Society refused to publish it, stating that the article was not focussed enough on Pali as a language. Here, then, at long last, is my response to Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi's article.

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In his paper *The Susīma-sutta and the Wisdom-Liberated Arahant* in vol. 29 of the PTS Journal, Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi provides a valuable investigation into the provenance and development in early Buddhist literature of the idea of the *arahant* devoid of *jhāna*. By using a broad range of texts, he succeeds in showing parallel developments across several Buddhist schools.

Despite agreeing with much of what Ven. Bodhi has to say, it seems to me that he goes too far when he suggests that the idea of arahantship without *jhāna* may already be implied in the very earliest strata of Buddhist texts. As part of his argument he presents a number of sutta passages which, in his opinion, may allow for this idea.<sup>2</sup>

In the present critique I wish to scrutinize Ven. Bodhi's interpretation of these passages. My purpose is twofold. Firstly, I intend to show that the sutta passages Ven. Bodhi refers to as hinting at the possibility of arahantship without *jhāna*, are unlikely to be meant in this way. Secondly, I aim to point out that the clear overall message from the suttas<sup>3</sup> is that *jhāna* is indispensable for the attainment of arahantship.

I will structure the critique around those of Ven. Bodhi's arguments that I disagree with. In each section below I will quote one of these arguments and then discuss my reasons for disagreeing. When I have discussed them all, I will draw the rather loose threads together in a summary and conclusion. But first of all it is necessary to consider a couple of general issues.

### 1.1 The Problem of Multiple Voices in the Pali Canon

It is clearly the case that the Pali suttas contain a number of different “voices”<sup>4</sup>, and this fact is also the basis for much of Ven. Bodhi's argument.<sup>5</sup> An important question that underlies Ven. Bodhi's paper is whether such diversity of authorship also implies a diversity in doctrine.<sup>6</sup>

In general, even if the suttas are a result of multiple authorships, one cannot automatically assume that this implies discrepancies in the doctrine. In fact, it seems more reasonable to assume the exact opposite: that the suttas are homogenous except if there is clear evidence to the contrary.<sup>7</sup> One important reason for this is that the inclusion of material in the Canon was governed by rules, the most important of which would have been the four great standards of the Mahāparinibbāna-sutta.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the extent to which the early Buddhist Saṅgha properly implemented these standards is also the extent to which one would not expect to find any diversity in doctrine. And since it would only have been natural for the Saṅgha as a whole to do its best to preserve the word of the Buddha,<sup>9</sup> it is incumbent on the person who wants to show doctrinal diversity to prove his case beyond reasonable doubt. That is, if anyone wishes to argue for the existence of a minority view that contradicts the more common or dominant doctrines, then such a view has to be clearly present. If it is mostly hinted at or it can reasonably be explained in terms of the majority view then, in my opinion, that would not be enough to dislodge a presumption of doctrinal unity.

Basing my argument on the above approach, I will point out that the numerically and doctrinally dominant position in the suttas is that *jhāna* is required for arahantship. Further, I will argue that there is no clear and unambiguous statement anywhere in the suttas to the effect that arahantship can be reached without *jhāna* and, consequently, that there is no basis for proposing that this exists even as a minority view in the Nikāyas.

### 1.2 A Preliminary Look at the Meaning of *Paññāvimutta* (Wisdom-Liberated)

At an early point in his paper Ven. Bodhi states:

P.56,<sup>10</sup> : "... they did not want to force an ambiguity that was hovering over the notion of the 'wisdom-liberated *arahant*' to become resolved too starkly in black-and-white terms."<sup>11</sup>

Ven. Bodhi's paper is framed as a discussion of the Nikāya concept of the *paññāvimutta arahant*. The question of whether arahantship without *jhāna* is allowed by the suttas, at least as a minority view, is approached by asking whether a wisdom-liberated *arahant* may in fact be "destitute" of *jhāna*. It would therefore seem useful already at this point to make a preliminary assessment of the term.

In the Nikāyas wisdom-liberated is a universal term that describes all *arahants* regardless of what other attainments they may have.<sup>12</sup> Wisdom-liberated simply means that one has reached the highest liberation by fully penetrating reality with wisdom.<sup>13</sup> In this sense all *arahants* are wisdom-liberated. Thus, in its most general usage, the term is neutral as far as other attainments are concerned.<sup>14</sup>

It is only when the wisdom-liberated *arahant* is contrasted with the 'both-ways-liberated *arahant*', the *ubhatobhāgavimutta arahant*, that he becomes more narrowly defined. When these two types of *arahants* are compared, only the both-ways-liberated *arahant* is said to possess the immaterial attainments.<sup>15</sup> But even when the suttas contrast the wisdom-liberated *arahant* with other *arahants* in this way, the *jhānas* never enter into the comparison. Indeed, as I intend to show, in the Nikāyas the place of *jhāna* on the Buddhist path is so central that there are no solid grounds for doubting that *jhāna* is required for arahantship of any kind.<sup>16</sup> It follows that, from a sutta perspective, there is no basis for seeing any "ambiguity" in the idea of the wisdom-liberated *arahant*. The rest of this critique will provide detailed reasons for this conclusion.

## 2. *Sammāsamādhi*

Before pointing out suttas that might be read as allowing for the attainment of arahantship without *jhāna*, Ven. Bodhi clarifies how he understands central concepts and passages in the Nikāyas that otherwise would seem to oppose this idea. The most important of these is the concept of *sammāsamādhi*.

P.57,25: "If we rely upon these texts, taking them literally, it would follow that any monk liberated by wisdom must have attained *all four jhānas*."<sup>17</sup> Such a conclusion, however, would be extreme, for other texts equally authoritative recognize the possibility of attaining arahantship on the basis of any *jhāna*."

Here Ven. Bodhi is in effect arguing that the standard sutta definition of *sammāsamādhi* as the four *jhānas* need not be taken literally. At a later point, he refers to certain suttas as suggesting that one may be able to practice the Buddhist path to its end without a single experience of *jhāna*.<sup>18</sup> For this to be possible one or both of the following two propositions must be true: either *sammāsamādhi* is not limited to the four *jhānas* and includes pre-*jhāna samādhi* or it is redundant for certain types of practitioners.

Let us look at the second proposition first. The problem here is that the idea of *sammāsamādhi* being redundant is a plain contradiction of the suttas. The most obvious reason for this is that the path to awakening has precisely eight factors.<sup>19</sup> If one removes *sammāsamādhi* one no longer has an eightfold path, and thus this cannot be a path to awakening. In my opinion this is an insurmountable obstacle and, as I intend to show, it is an opinion firmly supported by a number of sutta passages.<sup>20</sup>

What about the proposition that *sammāsamādhi* includes pre-*jhānic* forms of *samādhi*? *Sammāsamādhi* is universally defined as the four *jhānas*. There is very little if any sutta evidence to suggest that this definition may be expanded, particularly in the direction of pre-*jhāna samādhi*.<sup>21</sup> In the end, to take *sammāsamādhi* as including pre-*jhāna samādhi* is little more than speculation.

In light of this, one of my basic assumptions in the subsequent discussion will be that wherever *sammāsamādhi* occurs one can freely substitute the four *jhānas*. Before moving on, however, we must investigate the remaining question of whether the definition of *sammāsamādhi* should be taken literally as saying that *all four jhānas* are required for awakening.

The suttas Ven. Bodhi uses to back his argument<sup>22</sup> all show that one can attain arahantship (and thus become wisdom-liberated) by attaining any one of the four *jhānas* and then contemplating it to gain insight. The point of these suttas seems to be that one first attains a *jhāna* – any *jhāna* – and then immediately or soon afterwards investigates it. These suttas do *not* say, however, this is the first time one attains a *jhāna*. It is therefore quite possible, even if one bases one's insight contemplation on a lower *jhāna*, that one has attained the higher *jhānas*, including the fourth, at an earlier point.<sup>23</sup> Thus it can be argued, without contradicting these suttas, that attaining all four *jhānas* is required before the attainment of arahantship.

Still, it is perhaps more natural to read the suttas referred to by Ven. Bodhi as saying that *any jhāna* attainment may be

sufficient to serve as a foundation for insight leading to arahantship, irrespective of previous *jhāna* attainments. How then can one explain that *sammāsamādhi* is defined as the four *jhānas*? Even if some meditators are able to reach arahantship based on the first *jhāna* alone, it seems clear that other meditators would need to ascend to the higher *jhānas*, some all the way to the fourth. This is because the higher the *jhāna* the more power it has to give the desired result.<sup>24</sup> Thus, as one ascends to the higher *jhānas* the task of developing insight becomes progressively easier. It would seem, therefore, that although it may be possible to gain full awakening based on the first *jhāna* alone, some meditators would require one or more of the higher *jhānas*.<sup>25</sup> Given that the suttas treat the noble eightfold path as universal, and given that at least some meditators would require the fourth *jhāna*, it follows that the definition of *sammāsamādhi* must comprise all four *jhānas*. Understanding *sammāsamādhi* in this way allows one both to take its definition literally and to avoid any inconsistency with other suttas.

Finally, it would seem possible to understand the *sammāsamādhi* definition to mean that each one of the *jhānas* in its own right constitutes *sammāsamādhi*.<sup>26</sup> This way of understanding *sammāsamādhi* is perhaps the one that is easiest to square with those suttas that show the attainment of arahantship based on any one of the *jhānas*.<sup>27</sup>

### 3. *N'etaṃ t̥hānaṃ vijjati*

Having explained how, in his view, *sammāsamādhi* may accommodate the idea of arahantship without *jhāna*, Ven. Bodhi next turns to MN64 to explain how this sutta may be interpreted to allow for the same idea.

P.59,13: “If the above words – ‘that anyone, without relying on that path, shall know or see or abandon the five lower fetters, *this is impossible*’ – are taken as categorical, there is indeed no possibility at all that an *arahant* liberated by wisdom can be destitute of the first *jhāna*.”<sup>28</sup> [He then goes on to propose that they do not need to be taken as categorical, see below.<sup>29</sup>]

The passage from MN64 quoted here by Ven. Bodhi is one of the most important in the Nikāyas for deciding the place of *jhāna* on the Buddhist path. It is therefore necessary to be as clear as one can about what it means.

The Pali phrase here translated as “this is impossible”, *n'etaṃ t̥hānaṃ vijjati*, literally means “this case does not exist”. The immediate impression is certainly that this is a categorical statement. This impression is reinforced by a general knowledge of how this phrase is used on the numerous occasions it is found in the suttas. Nowhere, to the best of my knowledge, does this expression allow for exceptions. Indeed, in the present instance the statement is accompanied by a simile that makes it as clear as can be that no exception is envisaged:

“Just as when, Ānanda, there is a great tree standing possessed of heartwood it is not possible that anyone shall cut out its heartwood without cutting through its bark and sapwood, so too, Ānanda, there is a path, a way to the abandoning of the five lower fetters; that anyone, without relying on that path, on that way, should know or see or abandon the five lower fetters, *this is impossible*.”<sup>30</sup>

Ven. Bodhi next argues that MN64 may not be as categorical as it appears:

P.60,5: “We should remember that, while the suttas are remarkably consistent with each other, they are not rigidly so, and one can often find in some texts exceptions made to principles apparently laid down as categorical in other texts.”

As a generalisation I would tend to agree that the suttas are not “rigidly” consistent. But this does not mean that they do not contain any categorical statements. Indeed, as far as I am aware, when any statement is combined with the phrase *n'etaṃ t̥hānaṃ vijjati* it is precisely such a case.<sup>31</sup>

If the presence of *n'etaṃ t̥hānaṃ vijjati* means a statement is categorical, then any sutta passage that appears to contradict such a statement can only be considered a genuine contradiction if it is clear, unambiguous and incapable of being interpreted in a way that agrees with the categorical statement. This is significant for the validity of Ven. Bodhi's arguments that I quote in sections 6 and 7 below. These arguments are based on sutta passages that do not amount to clear and unambiguous statements, and they are therefore incapable of being categorised as genuine contradictions to statements such as the one quoted above from MN64. Rather, as I will show below, it is quite straightforward and natural to interpret them in line with MN64.

In sum, I cannot see how the passage quoted by Ven. Bodhi from MN64 can be interpreted except categorically. And, as Ven. Bodhi himself admits, this leads to the inevitable conclusion that *jhāna* is an absolute requirement for the attainment of arahantship.

### 4. Support for MN64 from Other Suttas<sup>32</sup>

Not only is it virtually impossible to view the above passage from MN64 as anything but categorical, but the position of MN64 is supported by other suttas. Just as categorical is AN6:68:

“... ‘not having fulfilled right concentration (ie, *jhāna*), one will abandon the fetters (ie, attain arahantship)’, this case does not exist”.<sup>33</sup>

In the Aṅguttara-nikāya we find several suttas that state that the *anāgāmi* has “fulfilled *samādhi*”.<sup>34</sup> It would seem highly likely that fulfilment of *samādhi* should be a reference to *jhāna*. However, if any doubt should remain, each of these suttas introduces the discussion by mentioning the training in the higher mind. Thus it seems clear that the fulfilment of *samādhi* is equivalent to the training in the higher mind. At AN3:88 the training in the higher mind is defined precisely as the four *jhānas*.<sup>35</sup>

### 5. Is *Jhāna* Perhaps *Lokuttarajjhāna*?

Sometimes the Abhidhamma concept of *lokuttarajjhāna* is brought forward as a potential substitute for “ordinary” *jhāna*. If *lokuttarajjhāna* is able to take the place of *jhāna* on the path, then it is quite obvious that *jhāna*, in its normal sense, is no longer required. In this connection Ven. Bodhi says the following:

P.59,16 + 59,26: “It will not suffice, either, to appeal to the Abhidhamma distinction between form-sphere (*rūpāvacara*) and supramundane (*lokuttara*) *jhānas* ... [since it] draw[s] upon modes of analysis derived from a later phase of Theravāda Buddhist thought.”

Certainly the Abhidhamma is “derived from a later phase of Theravāda Buddhist thought”, and I therefore agree that it is prudent not to use its particular methodology to interpret the suttas. But in the case of MN64 it is possible to be much more specific.

In MN64 each *jhāna* is described in the standard way and then contemplated in terms of the three characteristics.<sup>36</sup> According to the Abhidhamma method, however, *lokuttarajjhāna* is nothing less than the realization of Nibbāna, and thus the characteristics of suffering and impermanence do not apply.<sup>37</sup> Thus, as far as MN64 is concerned, one can reach a much firmer conclusion than Ven. Bodhi does: the Abhidhamma concept of supramundane *jhāna* is clearly not relevant.<sup>38</sup>

### 6. The Suttas Used by Ven. Bodhi to Support His Argument

Having shown how, in his opinion, concepts and passages that are normally taken to affirm the importance of *jhāna* on the path in fact may be regarded as allowing for arahantship without *jhāna*, Ven. Bodhi next presents suttas and passages that he regards as implying, or even overtly hinting, that arahantship can be achieved without *jhāna*.

P.60,2: “Although the words of the Mahāmāluṅkyā-sutta [MN64] quoted above might seem to rule out the possibility that those destitute of *jhāna* can achieve arahantship, several texts scattered across the Nikāyas hint that this conclusion would be a bit stern.”

Here Ven. Bodhi is suggesting there are suttas that contradict MN64. Since this is an important part of his argument, I will go through Ven. Bodhi’s interpretation of these “several texts” in some detail.

#### 6.1 AN4:163<sup>39</sup>

This sutta describes four modes of practice that lead to “realization”.<sup>40</sup> Two of these modes are based on *jhāna* practice and two on five specific contemplations. Ven. Bodhi then argues that a practitioner who relies on one of the latter two modes may have little or no acquaintance with *jhāna*. There are several problems with this suggestion.

The first problem is that this sutta, taken literally, does not in fact contrast one who relies on contemplation with any *jhāna* attainer, but with someone who attains *all* four *jhānas*. There is thus room for the one who relies on contemplation to attain any of the first three *jhānas* and still not fall into the category of the one who relies on *jhāna*. If this is granted, the difference between the practitioners described in A4:163 is not as hard and fast as it might seem at first glance. However, even if this is not granted, there are further problems with Ven. Bodhi’s suggestion.

An important point about this sutta is that its description of the practice that leads to realization is very brief. The first of the four modes of practice occupies no more than ten lines in the Pali text. A full description of the practice that leads to realization, by contrast, such as the standard paradigm known as the “gradual training”, typically occupies 4-5 pages.<sup>41</sup> The text describing the training found in AN4:163 consequently occupies less than one fifteenth of the standard description.

Once this is appreciated it becomes clear that the description in AN4:163 is equivalent to no more than a tiny extract of the full gradual training. It follows that the purpose of this text cannot possibly be to give a complete picture of the training; its purpose, rather, is to focus on one particular aspect, an aspect which in this case is central to a particular person’s progress on the path. Thus, while it is true that *jhāna* is not specifically mentioned for this person, neither is virtue, sense restraint, contentment, the abandoning of the five hindrances, or the three higher knowledges,<sup>42</sup> each one of which either invariably or often is part of the gradual training. The fact, therefore, that the first mode of practice in this sutta does not explicitly mention *jhāna* does not in any way imply that the practice described should be understood as excluding the *jhānas*.

That the *jhānas* are part of the practice for the person who relies on the five contemplations is further supported by the fact that all the practitioners described in this sutta are said to possess the *samādhi* of the five faculties. However, Ven. Bodhi thinks there is a way around this:

P.60,29: “It is true that the definition ascribes to this practitioner the five faculties, among them the faculty of concentration, sometimes defined by the *jhāna* formula. It is likely, however, that this practitioner has merely a facile acquaintance with *jhāna* or even none at all ...”.<sup>43</sup>

To back this statement Ven. Bodhi notes that there is an alternative definition of the faculty of concentration which does not mention the four *jhānas* and that this could be the definition intended for the first type of practitioner found in this sutta.<sup>44</sup> Because the practitioners mentioned in AN4:163 progress all the way to the end of the path,<sup>45</sup> Ven. Bodhi’s suggestion implies that this same alternative definition of the *samādhindriya* applies from the moment one first acquires it until one reaches full awakening.<sup>46</sup> Before we can evaluate whether this is reasonable we will have to take a closer look at how the *indriyas* evolve during the course of practice and also investigate the alternative definition of the faculty of concentration.

As far as the evolution of the *indriyas* is concerned, it is clear from the suttas that as one advances in the Buddhist training the spiritual faculties are continuously strengthened. A number of suttas in the Indriya-saṃyutta, SN48:12-18,<sup>47</sup> make it clear that as one proceeds on the Buddhist path, starting with the attainment of *saddhānusārī*<sup>48</sup> and ending with arahantship, the five faculties are strengthened with every single attainment on the way. It seems reasonable to conclude that there must be a considerable gulf in the strength of the faculties, including the *samādhindriya*, between a *saddhānusārī* and an *arahant*.<sup>49</sup>

Next we turn to the alternative definition of the *samādhi* faculty.<sup>50</sup> Since Ven. Bodhi is arguing that this alternative definition may be applicable for a practitioner who practices all the way to arahantship without *jhāna*, it is clear that he considers it possible that it may consist entirely of pre-*jhāna samādhi*. That is, it does not *have* to consist of just pre-*jhāna samādhi*, but in certain circumstances it may. But such pre-*jhāna samādhi* is already close to first *jhāna*. As with first *jhāna* it only occurs when the hindrances are absent.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, all types of pre-*jhāna samādhi* share a weaker version of the five *jhāna* factors with first *jhāna*.<sup>52</sup>

Combining these two findings - that the *arahant* has a *samādhi* faculty considerably stronger than the *saddhānusārī* and that even the least form of *samādhi* is already close to *jhāna* - it is virtually inconceivable that an *arahant* should not possess *jhāna*. This makes it highly improbable that the *samādhi* faculty could consist of pre-*jhānic samādhi* from the moment it is acquired all the way to full awakening, as implied by Ven. Bodhi.

Ven. Bodhi adds one final argument in his discussion of this sutta:

P.61,3: “[Since the five contemplations are contrasted with *jhāna* meditation then] [f]or the contrast to be meaningful, one would have to conclude either that the meditator on the ‘painful’ path has no experience of *jhāna* or that he assigns *jhāna* to a subordinate place in his practice”.<sup>53</sup>

I have already argued at some length that the option “no experience of *jhāna*” is directly contradicted by a number of suttas. But even Ven. Bodhi’s alternative conclusion that the meditator “assigns *jhāna* to a subordinate place in his practice” might be misleading. It is clear from the suttas that different people may adopt different emphases in their practice, for example in regard to *vipassanā* and *samatha*.<sup>54</sup> However, these differences may not just be a matter of “assignment” or choice. As is amply testified in the Nikāyas, different people have different strengths and proclivities: using the present discussion as an example, for some people contemplation may come more naturally than deep meditation. It is not so much that they see *jhāna* as “subordinate” in their practice but rather that they, by default, emphasize what comes most naturally to them.<sup>55</sup>

In sum, as I see it, the point of AN4:163 is to show the *primary* meditation activity of specific meditators, not an exclusive type of practice. In this way, I hold, the contrast between the different types of meditators described in AN4:163 is still fully “meaningful”.

## 6.2 AN4:169<sup>56</sup>

This sutta also contrasts the *jhānas* with the same five contemplations. As far as the present discussion is concerned this sutta is virtually identical with AN4:163. As such, all the above arguments put forward against Ven. Bodhi’s interpretation of that sutta are equally valid for this one.

## 6.3 AN5:69-71<sup>57</sup>

These three suttas are similar to the first and second types of practice mentioned in AN4:163+169 in that they show the practice of the five contemplations and then the realization of arahantship. But they differ from AN4:163+169 in that they do not mention the five powers of a trainee or the five spiritual faculties. Thus they are even simpler in structure. The argument that one cannot expect all the factors of the path to appear in a sutta as short as AN4:163 is even more

valid for the present three suttas: the only practice they mention are the five contemplations. Just as in the case of AN4:163, it is obvious that these five do not in themselves describe a full path. Important and necessary path factors such as virtue, sense restraint, mindfulness, and *samādhi* are not mentioned at all.

How then should these three suttas be understood? The first thing to note is that this type of sutta, describing how a single aspect of the path leads all the way to arahantship, is quite common in the Nikāyas. In a number of suttas in the Iddhipāda-saṃyutta, the four *iddhipādas* on their own are said to lead to arahantship.<sup>58</sup> At SN49:35-54 the same is said of the four right efforts.<sup>59</sup> At AN3:163 it is *suññata samādhi*, *animitta samādhi*, and *appaṇihita samādhi* that should be developed for arahantship.<sup>60</sup> At AN6:122 it is the six recollections, and at AN8:91 the “eight bases of transcendence”.<sup>61</sup>

In all the above instances it seems clear enough that the qualities mentioned cannot in their own right represent the entire path to arahantship. I would therefore again suggest that these suttas represent the *main* area of striving for a particular meditator. The early parts of the path such as virtue and sense restraint are presumably assumed to be already firmly established. The results of these practices – which might include all the *jhānas* and the four stages of awakening – would then be subsumed under the final purpose of arahantship. If the suttas AN5:69-71 are interpreted in this way, then the fact that they do not mention *jhāna* is not relevant for whether *jhāna* is required before attaining arahantship.

Alternatively, some of these brief suttas can perhaps be explained as an expansion of the terminology to include aspects of the path not usually included within these terms. For example, the usual explanation of the four right efforts as the striving to overcome the unwholesome and develop the wholesome could, at least in theory, be expanded to include virtue, the *satipaṭṭhānas*, the *jhānas*, and even the stages of awakening. A similar sort of expansion would seem to be possible for the six recollections and perhaps the *iddhipādas*. As for the five contemplations mentioned at AN5:69-71, it would seem clear enough that they are intended to lead to greater and greater detachment from the world of sensual experience, *kāmaloka*. One of the main prerequisites for *samādhi* and *jhāna* is specifically aloofness from the sensual world,<sup>62</sup> and thus one is here creating the foundation for these attainments to occur. Later on, the same contemplations would lead to even further detachment until, with the help of the *jhānas*, they give rise to arahantship. Thus, taken very broadly, there seems to be no reason why the five contemplations cannot be understood to include both the *jhānas* as well as the first three stages of awakening.

#### 6.4 AN4:87<sup>63</sup>

This sutta describes four types of eminent ascetics. Ven. Bodhi compares two of these, “the red-lotus ascetic” (the *arahant* who has attained the eight *vimokkhas*) and “the white-lotus ascetic” (the one who has not), to argue that the latter one does not appear to possess any of the *jhānas*. However, there are at least two problems with this suggestion.

Firstly, Ven. Bodhi’s argument relies on understanding the first three *vimokkhas*, or one or two among them, as equivalent to the four *jhānas*. But it is not obvious that this is the case. The way the *vimokkhas* are worded gives the impression that they are specific states based on a type of liberation (*vimokkha*) that is achieved by cultivating very specific perceptions. Using the commentarial explanation,<sup>64</sup> they are specific perceptions used to achieve *jhāna*. Alternatively, they can perhaps be regarded as perceptions that are developed after *jhāna*. In either case it is likely that these perceptions leave an impact on the mind - a liberation - beyond the experience of the simple *jhāna*. Thus, although the exact nature of the *vimokkhas* will have to remain speculative, their very specific wording points to a type of liberation different from, or additional to, that of *jhāna*.<sup>65</sup>

A second and more powerful reason why we cannot place much emphasis on AN4:87 in the present debate, is that Ven. Bodhi may have misconstrued the Pali. The crucial point here is to decide what is meant by the white-lotus ascetic not having attained the eight *vimokkhas* and the red-lotus ascetic having attained them. Ven. Bodhi evidently takes the first of these not to have *any* of the eight *vimokkhas* and the second to have one or more of them.<sup>66</sup> But it is unclear to me why Ven. Bodhi reads the Pali in this way. If we take the red-lotus ascetic first, the Pali quite literally says that “he has directly experienced the eight *vimokkhas*”.<sup>67</sup> I contend that in normal English usage this means that he has attained *all* eight *vimokkhas*.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, this understanding is supported by a passage in DN15 which is quite clear that the *ubhatobhāgavimutta arahant* has all eight *vimokkhas*.<sup>69</sup>

If the red-lotus ascetic has attained all eight *vimokkhas* then it would seem reasonable to take the white-lotus ascetic as having attained *not all* eight. Indeed, this is a reasonable reading of the Pali, which states that “he has not directly experienced the eight *vimokkhas*”.<sup>70</sup> The implication is that the white-lotus ascetic, and therefore also the *paññāvimutta arahant*, can possess any of the first seven *vimokkhas*, but not the eighth.<sup>71</sup> If this is correct then the whole problem surrounding AN4:87 falls away.

#### 7. The Susīma-sutta

Of the suttas that Ven. Bodhi quotes to back his argument that I have so far investigated, none directly mentions the *paññāvimutta arahant*. In the Susīma-sutta, however, the *paññāvimutta arahant* is centre stage, and consequently this is Ven. Bodhi’s main exhibit.

P.55,18: “It is intriguing that Susīma’s questions do not pry into any attainments that the monks might possess *below* the level of the formless emancipations.”

P.62,29: “The absence of the questions accomplishes two things ... and [secondly] it deftly hints that these monks did not have the *jhānas*. If the intention of the sutta were otherwise, Susīma could have asked about the *jhānas*, and the monks could have said, ‘Some of us attain one *jhāna*, some attain two, some attain three, and some attain all four.’ But by passing over this issue in silence, they discreetly imply that they do not attain the *jhānas* at all.”

It seems that Ven. Bodhi considers the absence of the *jhāna* question as “intriguing” and as a “deft hint” because Susīma asks about a whole range of high attainments but not the *jhānas*. Ven. Bodhi is suggesting, presumably, that the *jhānas* are *conspicuous* by their absence.

But this way of looking at this issue assumes that there is more in common between these high attainments and the *jhānas* than what separates them. If it could be shown that the *jhānas* should be regarded as quite distinct from the other attainments, then their absence might be easy to explain. And indeed, there are good reasons for placing the *jhānas* in a quite separate category from the attainments that Susīma actually asks about.

The paramount thing that makes the *jhānas* different is that they are a central factor of the path to awakening. The *jhānas* are included in the most important sets of qualities that take one to awakening, such as the eightfold path, the factors of awakening, and the spiritual faculties. They are part of the standard description of the path to awakening, that is, the gradual training. In addition to this they occur on numerous occasions throughout the suttas as an aspect of the Buddhist practice.<sup>72</sup> From Susīma’s point of view one might perhaps just as well ask about the necessity of virtue, effort, or mindfulness as to ask about the *jhānas*. On the other hand, none of the high attainments mentioned in the Susīma-sutta is a central factor on the path.<sup>73</sup> They are also much rarer in the suttas overall.<sup>74</sup> It follows that the *jhānas* are in a completely different category from the other attainments. This, in my opinion, is why Susīma did not ask about them: if he knew anything at all about the Buddha’s teachings, which seems highly likely,<sup>75</sup> he would almost certainly have heard about the *jhānas* being an important part of the path.<sup>76</sup>

Additionally or alternatively, as Ven. Bodhi himself suggests, it could simply be that Susīma measured spiritual accomplishment in terms of special powers.<sup>77</sup> Thus he may have thought that one could not possibly make any spiritual claims without having attained any of them. The Buddhist idea that the destruction of all defilements and the ending of rebirth is the highest achievement may have been difficult for outsiders to grasp.

### The Chinese Versions of the Susīma-sutta

An interesting question that Ven. Bodhi considers in some detail is whether any of the Chinese versions of the Susīma-sutta might be more original than the Pali.<sup>78</sup> If such a version can be found then it is this, rather than the Pali, that needs a reasonable interpretation. Which of the Chinese versions, if any, is likely to be more ancient than the Pali? In this I follow Ven. Bodhi’s suggestion that the Mahāsāṅghika version of the Susīma-sutta, found in the Mahāsāṅghika-vinaya,<sup>79</sup> is likely to be more original than the Sarvāstivāda version.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, I take it as likely that this version is more ancient than the Pali due to its simpler structure.<sup>81</sup> Thus, I will now turn to the Mahāsāṅghika version and see if it is able to shed any light on why Susīma did not ask the monks about their attainments of *jhāna*.

In the Mahāsāṅghika version, as in the Pali, Susīma hears a number of monks declare arahantship in the presence of the Buddha. He then asks these monks whether they have acquired various attainments, again paralleling the Pali. A significant difference from the Pali, however, is that in Mahāsāṅghika version Susīma only asks about three things: the divine eye, the recollection of past lives and the formless emancipations.<sup>82</sup> The arguments from the previous section, that the *jhānas* are in a different category from the attainments Susīma actually asks about and that Susīma may have measured spiritual accomplishment in terms of special powers, are also valid for this version of the sutta. But how might one understand the Mahāsāṅghika version considering its differences from the Pali?

The obvious explanation for Susīma’s questions is that he actually thought one or other of these attainments was required for awakening.<sup>83</sup> For example, Susīma might have heard a version of the gradual training that included the recollection of past lives and the divine eye before the attainment of full awakening.<sup>84</sup> He might also have heard a teaching such as the “nine gradual cessations”<sup>85</sup> where one reaches full awakening only after attaining each of the immaterial attainments in succession and then the cessation of perception and feeling.<sup>86</sup> Combining these two teachings, he may have concluded, quite reasonably, that either one or the other would be required for full awakening to be possible.<sup>87</sup>

In sum, it seems that confusion about the Buddha’s teaching could in numerous ways have led to Susīma’s misunderstanding. And there might even be other explanations for Susīma’s ideas. In general, it is not difficult to find plausible reasons why Susīma questioned the monks in exactly the way he did. But my main point is that, instead of seeing the lack of inquiry into the *jhānas* as “intriguing” or as a “deft hint”, such a lack should be expected since it seems highly likely that Susīma would have known about the *jhānas* as a path factor and therefore could not have doubted that they were required for awakening to occur.<sup>88</sup>

## 8. Conclusion and Summary

If the suttas are understood as I have proposed in this critique, Ven. Bodhi's understanding on p.75,4 that "But as I read it, even the older version of the sutta, S 12:70 and perhaps too M-Vin, originally intended to establish the possibility of arahantship without *jhānas*" becomes difficult to sustain. The evidence throughout the Nikāyas points to *jhāna* as an indispensable path factor, particularly so for the attainment of arahantship. Any passages that might be regarded as "minority voices" are ambiguous and easily interpreted in such a way that they fit with the clear majority position. It follows that in the Nikāyas *paññāvimutta* refers to an *arahant* who is liberated after attaining, at the very least, first *jhāna*.

To summarize, I have given the following arguments in support of this:

- In the Nikāyas *sammāsamādhi* is always equivalent to the four *jhānas*. Any suggestion that *sammāsamādhi* also includes pre-*jhānic samādhi* is speculation, in my opinion.
- The *jhāna* of the suttas, particularly in MN64, cannot be understood as supramundane.
- The suttas which indicate that *jhāna* is required as a foundation for attaining arahantship are unequivocal and do not allow for exceptions.
- None of the suttas Ven. Bodhi presents as suggesting the possibility of arahantship without *jhāna*, including the *Susīma-sutta*, are clear and unambiguous. Given that they can be interpreted one way or the other, they have to fall into line with the dominant, and at times categorical, position in the Nikāyas that *jhāna* is required for awakening.

I would propose that all the above can be summarized in the answer to a single question: Would anyone, without any knowledge of post-Nikāya Buddhist literature, ever conceive of the idea of arahantship without *jhāna* purely by reading the Pāli suttas? To me it seems clear that the answer to this question must be no.

### 9. Postscript: *Jhāna* and *Sotāpatti*

We have seen there is strong evidence in the Nikāyas that *jhāna* is required before the attainment of arahantship. Indeed, from such suttas as MN64 it seems clear enough that this is also the case for becoming a non-returner. But this begs a further question: at what point on the path is *jhāna* required? Is it required for the attainment of stream-entry?

A thorough search of the suttas leads us to conclude that there is no incontrovertible statement in the Nikāyas to the effect that *jhāna* is required before stream-entry. Nor is there any such statement in regard to the once-returner. The conclusion must be that we have solid evidence for *jhāna* being an absolute necessity only for the non-returner.

But it is vital not to lose sight of what is much more important than deciding on absolute requirements. What is really important, particularly for those who are intent on Buddhist practice, is surely to establish what is the most natural and effective way to reach one's desired goal. And as far as stream-entry is concerned it is easy to show from the suttas that *jhāna* is a natural stepping-stone for its achievement.

At MN68 we find that: "While he still does not attain to the rapture and pleasure that are secluded from sensual pleasures and secluded from unwholesome states, or to something more peaceful than that, covetousness ... ill will ... sloth and torpor ... restlessness and remorse ... doubt ... discontent ... weariness invades his mind and remains."<sup>89</sup> The "rapture and pleasure that are secluded from sensual pleasures and secluded from unwholesome states" is a reference to the first two *jhānas*.<sup>90</sup> The negative qualities that "invade the mind and remain" are the five hindrances plus discontent and weariness. Thus what this sutta is saying is that without attaining a *jhāna* there is no stability in the abandoning of the five hindrances and they may arise with relative ease. Now from AN5:51 it is known that any attainment such as *sotāpatti* can only be achieved when the hindrances are absent.<sup>91</sup> Putting these two suttas together, the significance of *jhāna* becomes clear.<sup>92</sup>

At DN29 the following statement is found: "Then such wanderers might ask: 'Well then, those who are given to these four types of pleasure-seeking (ie, the four *jhānas*)<sup>93</sup> - how many fruits, how many benefits can they expect? And you should reply: 'They can expect four fruits, four benefits.'<sup>94</sup> The text then goes on to list the four stages of awakening.<sup>95</sup>

But probably the most powerful indication of the importance of *jhāna* for *sotāpatti* is the commonly occurring sequence of conditionality sometimes known as "transcendental dependent arising". In this sequence *samādhi* or *sammāsamādhi* invariably precedes "knowledge and vision of things as they really are".<sup>96</sup> Since by far the most important form of *samādhi* described in the suttas is *jhāna*,<sup>97</sup> and since knowledge and vision of things as they really are is required for realizing *sotāpatti*, this comes close to saying that *jhāna* is required for stream-entry.

None of the above quotes requires absolutely that *jhāna* be attained before *sotāpatti*. At the same time they leave little doubt that *jhāna* is highly desirable. And this, it seems to me, is really the important point: at best, not attaining *jhāna* is going to make the attainment of stream-entry much more difficult; for certain meditators it may even make it impossible.<sup>98</sup>

There is also another way of looking at this question. Firstly, one needs to take into account that one of the important principles used in the suttas is gradualness: the suttas always start off with the more basic training and then stage by stage show the attainment of states of mind that are more and more lofty. This has an important consequence for what is



more natural to attain first, *jhāna* or *sotāpatti*. To attain *jhāna* one has temporarily to leave behind the world of sensory objects, *kāmaloka*. *Kāmaloka* is the lower of the three worlds constituting *saṃsāra*. But to become a *sotāpanna* one has to see *all five khandhas* as subject to the three characteristics and thereby temporarily leave behind *saṃsāra* altogether.<sup>99</sup> Thus, from the perspective of the gradualness of the path, it seems very clear that attaining *jhāna* is easier, probably much easier, than attaining stream-entry. It follows that the idea of attaining *sotāpatti* before *jhāna*, although perhaps possible under special circumstances,<sup>100</sup> goes against the general philosophy propounded by the Nikāyas.<sup>101</sup>

### A Red Herring

As a final point I want to briefly address the practical consequences of the present debate for someone attempting to follow the practice prescribed by the suttas.

It seems to me that the entire discussion of whether *jhāna* is required or not is at best devoid of practical consequences, at worst harmful. To see this, consider the following. The noble eightfold path is the path to awakening, to arahantship. Somewhere along that path, before attaining arahantship, one has to reach *jhāna* and *sotāpatti*. There is no absolute statement in the suttas as to which one of these one has to reach first. The correct way of practicing, therefore, is simply to practice the eightfold path – including both *samatha* and *vipassanā* – and let *jhāna* and *sotāpatti* happen in their natural order, whatever that may be.<sup>102</sup>

If based on the present discussion one were to decide that *jhāna* is not necessary before *sotāpatti* and therefore to deliberately avoid it – as seems to have happened in certain meditation circles<sup>103</sup> – one is narrowing down the possibilities for how the path may unfold. It is not “wrong” for *jhāna* to happen before *sotāpatti*, just as it is not “wrong” for *sotāpatti* to happen before *jhāna*. What is wrong is to insist that one must happen before the other. By not allowing these states to happen naturally as outcomes of the practice, one could end up not attaining any of them, let alone full awakening. Since for many the purpose of any discussion of the Buddha’s teachings is to clarify how one should practice, that would indeed be a sad irony. It follows that anyone seriously interested in Buddhist practice must be careful not to allow this whole debate to become a red herring.

**Notes** [Please use the default BACK button of your browser to return.]

<sup>1</sup> My sincere thanks are in particular due to Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi, who in spite being the object of this critique, gave much time to provide detailed feedback on an earlier version. My thanks are also due to Ven. Bhikkhu Analayo and Dr. Rupert Gethin, both of whom kindly provided much useful feedback. [Please use the default BACK of your browser to return.]

<sup>2</sup> See in particular section 2 of his paper, pp.55-62.

<sup>3</sup> I use the terms suttas and Nikāyas throughout this critique to refer to the four main Nikāyas of the Pali canon and occasionally other canonical texts that have parallels in other languages. I have sometimes supplied references to parallels in the Chinese canon, in particular where existing correspondence tables are not accurate or to give the precise location of a small portion of text.

<sup>4</sup> This is clear even on an immediate level: a number of suttas are explicitly said to have been spoken by disciples of the Buddha, some after the Buddha’s passing away. Then there is the narrative aspect of the suttas, which most likely was added by “redactors”. Further, the discrepancies between parallel suttas of different textual traditions, often in different languages, makes it clear that the suttas have undergone a substantial number of minor changes, and sometimes major changes, in the course of history. Also, a number of suttas in each textual tradition do not have parallels in the other traditions. This could point to a late date for the authorship of these suttas.

<sup>5</sup> For example, he often speaks of the influence of the “redactors” on the formation of suttas.

<sup>6</sup> Without going into details, it seems clear enough that there are minor inconsistencies between suttas, sometimes even within the same sutta. But these discrepancies are of such an insignificant nature that they do not affect the main doctrinal positions.

<sup>7</sup> In his book “The Buddhist Path to Awakening” Dr. Rupert Gethin tries, among other things, to show consistency of doctrine not only within the suttas, but also between the suttas and later Pali literature. With a few possible exceptions, he seems to have been successful in that endeavour.

<sup>8</sup> Cattāro mahāpadesa: DN16/DN II 123-126 and AN4:180/AN II 167ff.

<sup>9</sup> Moreover, this would have been reinforced by such institutions as the bhāṇaka tradition. This tradition of having groups of monks responsible for memorising sections of the canon would have ensured that unorthodox views and erroneous recollection were weeded out.

<sup>10</sup> Here, and in the following discussion, I refer to page and line numbers of Ven. Bodhi’s article as it appears in the PTS Journal.

<sup>11</sup> The ambiguity referred to concerns whether *jhāna* is required prior to becoming a “wisdom-liberated arahant”.

<sup>12</sup> Such as the supernatural powers or special attainments in *samādhi*, particularly the immaterial attainments.

<sup>13</sup> See for example the standard phrase for attaining arahantship at MN6/MN I 35,26-36,1: āsavānaṃ khayā cetovimuttiṃ paññāvimuttiṃ diṭṭhe va dhamme sayaṃ abhiññāya sacchikatvā upasampajja vihareyyan ti. It should be noted that it is *paññāvimutti* which is the indicator of arahantship here, not *cetovimutti*. *Cetovimutti* has a much wider usage in the suttas, particularly as a term for deep *samādhi*.

<sup>14</sup> It should be noted, however, that it is usually *paññāvimutti* that is used in the most general sense while *paññāvimutta*

is normally used in the more restricted sense discussed below. Despite this difference in usage the two terms are so similar that I take them to be essentially equivalent.

<sup>15</sup> See MN70/MN I 477,25-478,1.

<sup>16</sup> For details on this centrality see section 7 below. [\[Please use the default BACK of your browser to return.\]](#)

I would propose that the ambiguity perceived by Ven. Bodhi in the meaning of paññāvimutta is the outcome of the discussion in later Buddhist texts, in particular the commentaries. It seems to be generally accepted that part of the Abhidhamma and commentarial projects is to clarify any ambiguities and fill perceived lacunae in the original Nikāyas. Quite apart from the moot point of the extent to which the Abhidhamma and commentaries actually succeed in this, it seems clear that they actually create a number of previously non-existent ambiguities, including the one in paññāvimutta.

<sup>17</sup> Ven. Bodhi is referring to texts where the sammāsamādhi of the eightfold path, and also other central occurrences of samādhi, is defined as the four jhānas.

<sup>18</sup> See in particular his comments at p.60,2-8.

<sup>19</sup> Of particular interest here is the well-known verse from the Dhammapada which states that there is no path to awakening apart from the eightfold path (Dhp. 274). There are at least four existing parallels to this verse: T IV 572a18-19 in the Chinese version of the Dharmapada; T IV 766b29-c1 in the Chinese version of the Udāna-varga; verse 360 of the Patna Dhammapada (Cone 1989); and verse 12.11 in the Sanskrit Udāna-varga (in Franz 1965, according to communication from Ven. Bhikkhu Anālayo).

<sup>20</sup> See sections 3 and 4 below.

<sup>21</sup> The most common argument that sammāsamādhi may be broader than the four jhānas is to point to an alternative definition occasionally encountered in the suttas. This definition equates ariya sammāsamādhi with the one-pointedness of mind that is equipped with the other seven factors of the noble eightfold path (eg, at MN117/MN III 71,16). Yet this definition does not say anything about the contents of this samādhi. The only place where such a content is given is AN5:28/AN III 25-27 and it is no surprise that this content is precisely the four jhānas plus a fifth item: paccavekkhanānimittaṃ suggahitaṃ hoti sumanasikataṃ sūpadhāritaṃ suppaṭividdhaṃ paññāya. Despite the fifth factor, this reinforces our understanding of sammāsamādhi as the four jhānas.

For the sake of completeness we also need to briefly investigate the nature of the paccavekkhanānimitta. Firstly, this concept occurs nowhere else in the Nikāyas. On this basis alone I think it is reasonable to disregard it also in the present context. However, if I should make an attempt at pinning this term down, I would suggest that for the present purposes the most important point is that it appears to be a post-jhāna type of samādhi. This is so because the suttas almost invariably have a graduated structure (according to AN5:159/AN III 184,18 this is how Dhamma should be taught) and here paccavekkhanānimitta comes after the four jhānas. Moreover, this interpretation seems to be supported by the commentarial definition of suggahitaṃ: "... tena jhānavipassanāmaggā suṭṭhu gahitā honti ...", "the ways of insight into jhāna (or perhaps "the ways of jhāna and vipassanā") are well grasped by him" (Mp III 235,15). This could mean, then, that ariya sammāsamādhi includes the four jhānas as well as post-jhāna samādhi. There is no indication, however, that sammāsamādhi might include pre-jhāna samādhi. [\[Please use the default BACK of your browser to return.\]](#)

<sup>22</sup> AN9:36, MN52, and MN64, respectively mentioned by Ven. Bodhi on p.58,3; p.58,11; and p.59,1.

<sup>23</sup> Two questions might be asked concerning this: If the meditator has attained the four jhānas in the past, why is he now satisfied with attaining a lower one? And why does he not contemplate the highest jhāna he has attained, ie, the fourth jhāna? The answer to the first question is simply that one's ability to attain any state of samādhi will vary from time to time depending on all sorts of conditions. (The suttas provide several examples of this, eg, AN9:35/AN IV 418-22 and SN4:23/SN I 120-2.) Just because one has attained the fourth jhāna before does not mean that one can re-attain this jhāna at will. The answer to the second question could be that one needs the jhāna freshly in mind to be able to contemplate it successfully, ie, in order to attain arahantship.

One might then perhaps pose a third question: What purpose does the previous attainment of the fourth jhāna serve if one bases one's insight contemplation on a lower jhāna? The answer to this will have to be speculative, but it seems to me that a past attainment could well exert some influence over one's later contemplation. Perhaps such past attainment gives one a broader understanding of the mind, maybe a type of wisdom, which then helps yield results when one contemplates a lower jhāna.

<sup>24</sup> That each jhāna is more "powerful" than the previous one can be seen for example in the standard description of the fourth jhāna as upekkhāsatiṭṭhāna, "purification of mindfulness by equanimity". In other words, it is only when one attains the fourth jhāna that mindfulness reaches its peak. That the jhānas are progressively more "powerful" is also implicit in the gradual development of the jhānas, whereby each successive jhāna builds on the previous one.

<sup>25</sup> In fact, since the enumeration of all four jhānas is so common in the suttas, I would contend that the practice of all four constitutes the standard and most common path to arahantship.

<sup>26</sup> It seems that sammāsati, the seventh factor of the noble eightfold path, must be understood in the same way. Sammāsati is defined as the four satipaṭṭhānas, and in MN118 it seems clear enough that each satipaṭṭhāna in its own right, when practiced fully, has the ability to lead to full liberation. Thus it seems that each and every satipaṭṭhāna on its own has the potential to fulfil sammāsati.

<sup>27</sup> Such as MN64, see section 3 below.

<sup>28</sup> The text quoted by Ven. Bodhi is found at MN64/MN I 434,25-28.

<sup>29</sup> Or perhaps that the statement in MN64 is categorical but that there are alternative views elsewhere.

<sup>30</sup> MN64/MN I 434,28-35: seyyathāpi, ānanda, mahato rukkhassa tiṭṭhato sāravato tacamaṃ chetvā pheggumaṃ chetvā sāraccchedo bhavissatīti – n'etaṃ ṭhānaṃ vijjati; evameva kho Ānanda yo maggo yā paṭipadā pañcannaṃ orambhāgiyānaṃ saṃyojanānaṃ pahānāya taṃ maggaṃ taṃ paṭipadaṃ anāgama pañc'orambhāgiyāni saṃyojanāni ñassati vā dakkhīti vā pajahissati vā ti n'etaṃ ṭhānaṃ vijjati.

<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the present situation is perhaps unique in that it supplies a simile whose only purpose seems to be to show that no exception is allowed.

<sup>32</sup> For further references concerning the importance of jhāna for attaining arahantship, see Anālayo 2003: pp.79-85.

<sup>33</sup> AN III 423,4-6: Sammāsamādhim̐ aparipūretvā saṃyojanāni pajahissatī ti n'etaṃ ṭhānaṃ vijjati.

Note that this sutta, like MN64, uses n'etaṃ ṭhānaṃ vijjati. The commentary to this sutta states that sammāsamādhi (jhāna) in this case refers to supramundane jhāna (lokuttarajjhāna). However, I have elsewhere tried to show that this interpretation is untenable from a sutta point of view; see Brahmāli Bhikkhu 2007, pp.83-85. See also Ven. Bodhi's own rejection of such commentarial interpretation at p.59,16, and my discussion below in section 5. [\[Please use the default BACK of your browser to return.\]](#)

<sup>34</sup> AN3:85/AN I 232,12-20; AN3:86/AN I 233,22-36; and AN9:12/AN IV 308,1-4+8-13: samādhismiṃ paripūrākārī. A Chinese parallel is found at SĀ822/T II 211a23-28.

<sup>35</sup> AN I 235,21-24: Katamā ca bhikkhave adhicittasikkhā? Idha bhikkhave bhikkhu vivicc'eva kāmehi ... catuṭṭhajjhānaṃ upasampajja viharati. Ayaṃ vuccati bhikkhave adhicittasikkhā.

The same definition is also found at AN3:89/AN I 235,37-236,2. The Chinese parallels SĀ817+832 contain the same definition.

<sup>36</sup> The contemplation of the first jhāna is at MN I 435,31-35, and the contemplations of the other jhānas follow in succession.

<sup>37</sup> This is also likely to be the reason why the commentary to MN64 does not explain jhāna as supramundane.

<sup>38</sup> See also Brahmāli Bhikkhu 2007 where I have argued more generally that the Abhidhamma concept of lokuttarajjhāna is not applicable to the suttas.

<sup>39</sup> Ven. Bodhi discusses this sutta at p.60,8.

<sup>40</sup> This is Ven. Bodhi's rendering of abhiññā or ānantariyaṃ pāpunāti āsavānaṃ khayāya, which seem to be used synonymously in this sutta.

<sup>41</sup> See for example MN51/MN I 344,24-348,34. Some versions are substantially longer: the one found in DN2/DN I 62,33-84,35 occupies a full 22 pages.

<sup>42</sup> AN4:163 uses the expression ānantariyaṃ āsavānaṃ khaya, which is not identical to any of the three higher knowledges.

<sup>43</sup> The practitioner referred to here is the first of the four types mentioned in AN4:163. This type of practitioner is distinguished as one who relies on five types of contemplation for his progress on the path. (He is also distinguished by the weakness of his faculties, but that is not important for the present discussion.)

<sup>44</sup> P.61,6: "It could even be that an alternative definition of the faculty of concentration found in the Indriya-saṃyutta is intended precisely for such kind of practitioners."

It is possible, of course, that the two definitions are merely different ways of stating the same thing, ie, that the four jhānas define the samādhindriya. (See discussion in Gethin 2001, pp.118-119.) However, I think Ven. Bodhi may be right to conclude that the alternative definition also encompasses a lesser form of samādhi. This is so for the following reason. The usual definition of the saddhindriya is given as the four factors of streamentry. That is, according to this definition one must be at least a stream-enterer to possess the faculties. But since also the saddhānusārī and the dhammānusārī are said to possess the spiritual faculties, I would propose that the alternative definition has been formulated specifically to include them. Indeed, the alternative definition is expressed in terms of saddahati, rather than avecca pasāda, and this matches the description of the saddhānusārī elsewhere. The saddhānusārī is described as having saddahati that phenomena are conditioned (SN25:1-10/SN III 225/228) and as having saddhāmatta in the Tathāgata (MN70/MN I 479,21).

<sup>45</sup> Or very close to the end: ānantariyaṃ āsavānaṃ khaya. [\[Please use the default BACK of your browser to return.\]](#)

<sup>46</sup> The indriyas are thus regarded as fairly static. The same way of looking at the indriyas is also implied by Ven. Bodhi's translation of an extract of AN4:163 where he renders pātubhavanti as "are manifest" (p.60,19). However, the usual translation of pātubhavati - the one used by Ven. Bodhi himself in CDB and MLDB and the one which conforms much more closely to the usage of pātubhavati throughout the Nikāyas - is "appears". If one adopts this standard translation there is no sense that the indriyas are static.

<sup>47</sup> Close Chinese parallels are found at SĀ652/T II 183a24-b3 and SĀ653/T II 183b4-17.

<sup>48</sup> It is at this point that the spiritual faculties are "acquired". At MN70/MN I 479,22-24 the saddhānusārī (the lowest category of ariyapuggala) is said to possess the five faculties. The puthujjana on the other hand is potentially completely devoid of the faculties, see SN48:18/SN V 202,23-25.

<sup>49</sup> The way the indriyas are used in AN4:163 might seem unusual since they seem to appear only after the trainee powers are acquired. Given this unusual situation, I would suggest that "appears" here could refer to, not the initial appearance, but the subsequent strengthening of the faculties. Alternatively, and perhaps more likely, I believe the Pali can be read as the trainee powers and the indriyas appearing together when the practitioner first becomes an ariyapuggala.

It should also be noted that the faculties can remain relatively weak all the way to arahantship. This does not imply that this person has not strengthened his faculties during his progress on the path, but rather that despite such strengthening his faculties are still weak compared to others at the same level.

<sup>50</sup> On p.61,10 Ven. Bodhi translates this faculty as follows: "the concentration or one-pointedness of mind that arises having made release the object".

<sup>51</sup> For pre-jhāna samādhi see, eg, SN47:8/SN V 151,29 where the mind becomes concentrated when the upakkilesā are abandoned. Upakkilesa has several shades of meaning in the suttas but here seems to refer to refined aspects of the hindrances, in a manner similar to MN128. (In SN47:8 the meditator is already practicing satipaṭṭhāna and the coarse

hindrances would therefore already have been removed since this is a prerequisite for proper satipaṭṭhāna practice). The standard description of first jhāna includes the wording vivicceva kāmehi vivicca akusalehi dhammehi, eg, at MN I 21,34. See also AN5:51/AN III 63,24-64,3 which makes it clear that one cannot attain any uttarimanussadhamma (which includes jhāna) without first having abandoned the five hindrances.

<sup>52</sup> The five jhāna factors of first jhāna are vitakka, vicāra, pīti, sukha, and ekaggatā, see MN43/MN I 295,1-2. That pre-jhāna samādhi possesses a weaker version of the jhāna factors can be seen from the following. Ekaggatā is the generic definition of samādhi at MN44/MN I 301,13. Pīti and sukha are mental qualities that arise before any form of samādhi is attained, as can be seen from the standard sequence of “transcendental dependent arising”, eg, at AN10:3/AN V 4,10. Vitakka and vicāra are the coarsest aspect of the first jhāna. This is their last vestige before they completely disappear in second jhāna. In any pre-jhāna samādhi vitakka and vicāra will be relatively “stronger”.

<sup>53</sup> Again, note that the practice described here leads all the way, or virtually all the way, to arahantship. [\[Please use the default BACK of your browser to return.\]](#)

<sup>54</sup> See for example AN4:94, AN4:163, and AN4:170.

<sup>55</sup> To deliberately subordinate jhāna in one’s practice would not seem wise given that jhāna in the Nikāyas has such a prominent place on the path. Moreover, jhāna practice is proclaimed superior on account of the happiness experienced therein, see AN4:166.

<sup>56</sup> Ven. Bodhi discusses this sutta at p.61,12.

<sup>57</sup> Ven. Bodhi discusses these three suttas at p.61,20.

<sup>58</sup> See SN51:14/SN V 271,23-25; SN51:23/SN V 284,18-21; SN51:24/SN V 284,23-24; SN51:25/SN V 285,4-7; SN51:26/SN V 285,11-20; SN51:31/SN V 289,1-5; and SN51:32/SN V 290,3-6.

<sup>59</sup> SN V 246,29-248,5. The last ten of these suttas specifically relate to the anāgāmī who is practicing to become an arahant.

<sup>60</sup> AN I 299,15-27.

<sup>61</sup> Respectively at AN III 452,6-10 and AN IV 348,12-349,7.

<sup>62</sup> This is clear from the standard description of the first jhāna as vivicc’eva kāmehi.

<sup>63</sup> Ven. Bodhi discusses this sutta at p.70,17.

<sup>64</sup> See commentary to DN15 at Sv II 513,2.

<sup>65</sup> To appreciate the apparent difference between the vimokkhas and the jhānas, consider the third vimokkha which is described as “subhan’t’eva adhimutto hoti”. At SN46:54/SN V 119,16 we find “subhaṃ vā kho pana vimokkhaṃ upasampajja viharati, subhaparamāhaṃ bhikkhave mettācetovimuttiṃ vadāmi”. It would seem reasonable to assume that subha adhimutta is equivalent to subha vimokkha. (Indeed, this is also the interpretation at Paṭis II 39.) Now from the passage quoted at SN46:54 it is clear that this vimokkha is the highest liberation that results from mettā practise. But mettācetovimutti, together with the other three brahmāvihāras, is considered quite distinct in the suttas from the jhānas. In fact, they seem consistently to be regarded as a higher kind of vimokkha than the jhānas (see eg, MN52/MN I 350-352). It thus appears clear that at least the third vimokkha is quite distinct from the jhānas. [\[Please use the default BACK of your browser to return.\]](#)

<sup>66</sup> P.70,7-10. Ven. Bodhi does not actually say that he takes the red-lotus ascetic to have one or more of the vimokkhas (rather than all eight, see the following), but this seems to be implied by how he understands the definition of the white-lotus ascetic.

<sup>67</sup> AN II 87,14: aṭṭha ca vimokke kāyena phassitvā viharati.

I translate kāyena phassitvā as “directly experienced” since this concerns the mental “body” not the physical one.

<sup>68</sup> I am not aware of any reason why Pali usage should be different.

<sup>69</sup> DN15/DN II 71,18-21.

This passage states that one is called an ubhatobhāgavimutta arahant “when one attains the eight vimokkhas in forward order, in reverse order, and in forward and reverse order, and attains and comes out where one desires, what one desires, and as far as one desires ...”. (I am assuming that the red-lotus ascetic is equivalent to the ubhatobhāgavimutta arahant of DN15 and the white-lotus ascetic to the paññāvimutta arahant.)

What about the definition of the ubhatobhāgavimutta arahant in MN70 as an arahant who has attained the immaterial attainments? It seems possible that the original reading in MN70 also referred to the eight vimokkhas rather than the immaterial attainments, since this is what we find in its Chinese parallel (MĀ195/T I 751b14-15). In fact, it seems that all known definitions of the ubhatobhāgavimutta arahant, apart from the one in MN70, make use of the eight vimokkhas (see discussion under MN70 in Anālayo forthcoming). Alternatively, the definition in MN70 can perhaps be regarded as a weaker version of the one in DN15. This would seem to be allowed by DN15, which specifically states that there is no ubhatobhāgavimutta arahant beyond or more sublime than the one described there. Thus there is apparently room for lesser such arahants who do not possess all eight vimokkhas.

<sup>70</sup> AN II 87,9-10: no ca kho aṭṭha vimokke kāyena phassitvā viharati.

<sup>71</sup> I take it as given that AN4:87 should not be interpreted as the white-lotus ascetic possessing no vimokkhas while the red-lotus ascetic possesses all eight. This would leave a huge gap in the scheme with all those possessing any one or more of the first seven vimokkhas excluded. Such an interpretation would seem unlikely.

<sup>72</sup> They are likely to be one of the most frequently occurring of all the path factors. For a preliminary but non-exhaustive idea of their importance see CDB, p.1489, table 7.

<sup>73</sup> The recollection of past lives and the divine eye are usually part of the gradual training. Apart from this, however, they do not occur in any of the standard sets of path factors. The other three supernormal powers (leaving out the destruction of the āsavas) are never presented as important path factors. The immaterial attainments are sometimes included on the path to awakening, but never in any of the standard sets or paradigms.

<sup>74</sup> This is particularly so for the three supernormal powers mentioned in the previous note. The immaterial attainments and the recollection of past lives and the divine eye are relatively more common; but the jhānas are still far more common, probably by several multiples. [\[Please use the default BACK of your browser to return.\]](#)

<sup>75</sup> Otherwise he would not have been able to ask the questions he did.

In in the Pali version of the *Susīma-sutta* it appears that *Susīma* goes to Ven. Ānanda, receives his ordination, and asks his questions all on the same day. But an important point to keep in mind is that the suttas are often very truncated versions of the described events. It is impossible with any precision to guess the actual time span even between events that are presented as consecutive. It is conceivable, therefore, that there was a substantial time gap between *Susīma's* approaching Ven. Ānanda and his questioning of the monks, and that he would have learnt the basics of the Buddha's teaching, including the place of jhāna on the path, during this period. In fact, in the *Mahāsāṅghika* version of the *sutta*, *Susīma* is told he has to live on probation for four months before he can be ordained (T XXII 362, c17), and the *Sarvāstivāda* version mentions a two-week interval between *Susīma's* ordination and his questioning of the monks (T II 97,a3).

<sup>76</sup> Another problem with Ven. Bodhi's interpretation of the *Susīma-sutta* is that although he here ascribes the present appearance of the *Susīma-sutta* to the redactors' "deft hinting", he later on (p.66,5) suggests that the reason *Susīma* asked about the supernormal powers is because they would have been regarded as particularly useful "to impress gullible lay devotees". With this latter suggestion Ven. Bodhi is arguing that the incident goes back to a real historical event. But the fact that *Susīma* asks about these powers cannot both be the outcome of the redactors' "deft hint" and the result of a historical incident. If the incident is a result of redactors' intervention, then Ven. Bodhi's argument that the "greater detail" of the Pali can be explained through assuming it is a historical incident must be rejected. (This could mean that the *Mahāsāṅghika* version is more original than the Pali since, in the absence of other explanations, greater detail would normally be taken as a sign of comparative lateness. For the significance of this, see the next section, "The Chinese Versions of the *Susīma-sutta*".) On the other hand, if the *Susīma-sutta* is based on a historical incident, and Ven. Bodhi is right to think that *Susīma* asked about the special powers because they might impress lay devotees, then he would have had no reason to ask about the jhānas in the first place. The jhānas are not the sort of spiritual accomplishment that would normally strike "gullible lay devotees" as impressive.

Alternatively, it might perhaps be suggested that the incident could be a mixture of historical event and redactors' editing. If so, and *Susīma* originally only asked about the first and third supernormal powers (as suggested by Ven. Bodhi, p.66,8), then the expansion to include all five supernormal powers could be explained as a "normalisation" by the redactors. The suttas appear to have been substantially "normalised" in this way since doctrinal formulas tend to be identical in content and wording throughout the *Nikāyas*. Again, there is no reason to think the jhānas are hinted at by their absence.

<sup>77</sup> P.66,10: "This would then better explain *Susīma's* scepticism that there could be wisdom-liberated arahants who lack such powers."

The jhānas would probably have been regarded as too ordinary in such a context.

<sup>78</sup> See in particular p.66,2-12 and p.68,9-22.

<sup>79</sup> Ven. Bodhi designates this version of the *Susīma-sutta* as M-Vin. [\[Please use the default BACK of your browser to return.\]](#)

<sup>80</sup> P.68,9.

<sup>81</sup> On p.66,4 Ven. Bodhi also recognizes this as a criterion for deciding the relative antiquity of parallel texts: "The twofold scheme has the advantage of economy, and greater detail usually suggests lateness ...". He then counters this argument by assuming that the *Susīma-sutta* originated from a historical incident and then suggesting that such an incident can explain the greater detail of the Pali. But, as I have argued in footnote 76 above, if the *Susīma-sutta* is the outcome of redactors' editing, or a mix of editing and historical event (which to me seems the most likely hypothesis), then simplicity and brevity are after all likely to be indicators of antiquity.

<sup>82</sup> P.65,18.

<sup>83</sup> This would not be a likely explanation for the Pali since several of the attainments mentioned there are not part of the path leading to awakening.

<sup>84</sup> Note, however, that the presentation in the *Mahāsāṅghika* version seems to suggest that *Susīma* thought either the recollection of past lives or the divine eye was required for awakening. If he had based himself on the gradual training one would have expected him to conclude that both were required.

Also note that, in the Pali, all versions of the gradual training appear to include these two knowledges. Indeed, the frequency with which they are mentioned must make them very important, although perhaps not indispensable. In the Chinese, it seems, they are not always included (see discussion of MN27 and MN39 in *Anālayo* forthcoming).

<sup>85</sup> *Nava anupubbanirodha*, see AN9:31. See also AN9:32+33 for the "nine gradual dwellings", *nava anupubbavīhāra*.

<sup>86</sup> Again, it seems clear that *Susīma* had some knowledge of the Buddhist teachings, since otherwise he would not have been able to ask the questions he asked.

<sup>87</sup> In contrast, note that all the standard path factors, including jhāna, would be required under either scenario.

<sup>88</sup> It is also worthwhile noting that a large part of the *Susīma-sutta* is narrative: close to 50% in the Pali version and more than 50% in the *Mahāsāṅghika* version. In both versions the whole section where *Susīma* asks the monks about their various attainments is part of this narrative. Since the narrative is not spoken by the Buddha (at least it is not presented as such) it is possible that it is a relatively late redactors' addition. (Ven. Bodhi seems to regard this matter in the same way. On p.55,20-23 he says: "I assume that ... the actual dialogue, particularly in the first part, is partly the work of the compilers of the texts.") Indeed, this may explain why this section differs to such considerable degree in the various versions. Moreover, from the point of view of authority, the word of the Buddha supersedes any doctrinal lessons that may be drawn from purely narrative passages. (For the *Nikāya* position on this see in particular

AN5:79/AN III 107,11-27.)

<sup>89</sup> MN I 463,32-464,1: Vivekaṃ, anuruddhā, kāmehi vivekaṃ akusalehi dhammehi pītisukhaṃ nādhigacchati aññaṃ vā tato santataraṃ, tassa abhijjhā ... byāpādo ... thīnamiddham ... uddhaccakukkuccam ... vicikicchā ... aratī ... tandīpi cittaṃ pariyādāya tiṭṭhati.

<sup>90</sup> The phrase “rapture and pleasure that are secluded from sensual pleasures and secluded from unwholesome states” is found with slightly different wording in the standard formula for the first jhāna. The phrase “something more peaceful than that” is a reference to the third and fourth jhānas as well as the immaterial attainments.

<sup>91</sup> AN III 63,24: So vata, bhikkhave, bhikkhu ime pañca āvaraṇe nīvaraṇe cetaso ajjhāruhe paññāya dubbalīkaraṇe appahāya, abalāya paññāya dubbalāya attatthaṃ vā ñassati paratthaṃ vā ñassati ubhayatthaṃ vā ñassati uttari vā manussadhammā alamariyañāṇadassanavisesaṃ sacchikarissatī netaṃ ṭhānaṃ vijjati.

<sup>92</sup> It might be thought that since the hindrances need to be abandoned also for the attainment of jhāna, there is no apparent reason why jhāna should be attained before sotāpatti. However, as I intend to show below, jhāna is nonetheless easier to attain than sotāpatti. [Please use the default BACK of your browser to return.]

<sup>93</sup> The four jhānas are listed immediately prior to this passage, see DN III 131,16-132,8.

<sup>94</sup> DN III 132,9-15: Ṭhānaṃ kho panetaṃ, cunda, vijjati, yaṃ aññatitthiyā paribbājakā evaṃ vadeyyuṃ -- `ime panāvuso, cattāro sukhallikānuyoge anuyuttānaṃ viharataṃ kati phalāni katānisaṃsā pāṭikañkhā'ti? evaṃvādino, cunda, aññatitthiyā paribbājakā evamassu vacanīyā -- `ime kho, āvuso, cattāro sukhallikānuyoge anuyuttānaṃ viharataṃ cattāri phalāni cattāro ānisaṃsā pāṭikañkhā.

The Chinese parallel at DĀ17 is quite close. As in the Pali it lists the four jhānas (T I 75a19-26), but then adds for each jhāna that “those who (attain) that happiness thus [i.e. jhāna], are praised by the Buddha”, 如是樂者。佛所稱譽 (T I 75a20+22+24+26). The Chinese then says that the jhānas have seven results rather than the four of the Pali. These are two types of arahantship and five types of anāgāmitā (T I 75a26-b4). The Chinese does not mention streamentry or once-returnership.

<sup>95</sup> DN III 132,16-32.

<sup>96</sup> See, eg, AN10:3/AN V 4,10: sammāsamādhimhi asati sammāsamādhivipannassa hatūpanisaṃ hoti yathābhūtañāṇadassanaṃ; and the converse at AN V 5,1: sammāsamādhimhi satī sammāsamādhisampannassa upanisasampannaṃ hoti yathābhūtañāṇadassanaṃ. The same is found at AN5:24, AN6:50, AN7:61, AN8:81, AN10:4+5, and AN11:3-5. See also SN12:23/SN II 30,13-16.

<sup>97</sup> See discussion in Brahmāli Bhikkhu 2007, footnote 1.

<sup>98</sup> Such differences are to be expected since the composition of the spiritual faculties will vary considerably from person to person.

<sup>99</sup> That is, temporarily leave behind attachment and craving.

Although I use “temporary” both in regard to jhāna and sotāpatti, this does not mean that these states are in any way comparable. Exactly what time span is involved could well be quite different for the two. The point is simply that one abandons attachment to something temporarily, however long that may be.

<sup>100</sup> Perhaps one such special circumstance would be the presence of the Buddha or a particularly impressive arahant. Such a person might cause faith of such strength to arise in a spiritually mature person that the hindrances would soon be abandoned. This might be one plausible explanation for the number of people who appear to have attained sotāpatti upon meeting the Buddha for the very first time.

But there are other equally plausible explanations for these attainments. As I have noted before, the narrative in the suttas is often truncated so that it only describes the most important events in a particular story. It is thus quite possible that it should be inferred that a substantial amount of time passed from the time these people first met the Buddha until they attained sotāpatti. Another plausible explanation is that these suttas are unreliable recollections years after the actual events. Many of them are virtually identical and most of them are narratives without any proper discourse from the Buddha except for a highly standardised teaching. [Please use the default BACK of your browser to return.]

<sup>101</sup> The Buddhist path can be regarded as a gradual relinquishment of craving and attachment. Gradualness implies that there is a general order to that relinquishment. As one’s meditation and wisdom deepen, stage-by-stage one’s craving and attachments become less. Again, jhāna comes naturally before sotāpatti.

<sup>102</sup> This does not mean that different people will not place different emphasis on different aspects of the practice, particularly samatha and vipassanā. All it means is that one should ensure that one develops the full noble eightfold path and allow the mind to develop naturally in accordance with that practice.

<sup>103</sup> In particular where jhāna is warned against as a potential obstacle since, the argument goes, one may become attached to it.

## Abbreviations

AN Anguttara-nikāya  
CBETA Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association  
CDB Connected Discourses of the Buddha  
DĀ Dīrgha-āgama  
Dhp Dhammapada  
DN Dīgha-nikāya  
JPTS Journal of the Pali Text Society  
MĀ Madhyama-āgama  
MLBD Middle Length Sayings of the Buddha

MN Majjhima-nikāya  
Mp Manorathapūranī, commentary on the Anguttara-nikāya  
Patis Patisambhidhāmagga  
PTS Pali Text Society  
SN Samyutta-nikāya  
SĀ Samyukta-āgama  
Sv Sumangalavilāsini, commentary on the Dīgha-nikāya  
T Taisho edition of the Chinese Buddhist canon

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